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Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

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Dr. Novak

By Rena Berliner

Vladek's Aunt Pani Gruzinska was a short stout woman with kindly blue eyes and gray hair twisted into a neat bun. Standing in the open door of her apartment she reminded me of a middle-aged schoolteacher. Her voice was friendly and rather high pitched as she asked us to enter.

" Please come quickly", she said. " I hope none of the neighbors saw you ".

Once inside her dark and gloomy living room, filled with heavy mahogany furniture, she asked us to sit down. Vladek took his aunt aside and after exchanging a few whispered words with her, he left.

So here we were in Warsaw.

Vladek's part in our escape from Lvov was finished. He delivered us, as promised, to his Aunt and was handsomely paid for it by my mother. Exhausted from our journey from Lvov, Mother and I still had to discuss the amount of money we were to pay Mrs. Gruzinska for our stay and upkeep. Sitting in a mahogany chair, all we did was nod our heads in agreement.

Who could bargain in a situation like this?

We were happy to be here, in a gentile woman's apartment in Warsaw, away from the horrors of Lvov's ghetto where only a handful of Jews still survive. Father was dead, shot on the sands of Janovska K.2. My only sister was dead too, gas in the gas chambers of Belzec; she was only 14 years old.

We had some money obtained from the sale of mother's diamond ring. My father's friend took care of the sale and for part of the money obtained false Aryan documents and hired Vladek, whom he knew, to bring us safely to his aunt in Warsaw.

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in the country ", Mrs. Gruzinska said " and now let me show you where you will be staying ".

The living quarters was a small alcove where a bed and a narrow chest of drawers were stored; a wardrobe concealed the entrance and could be easily pushed to the side.

" This is your hiding place " we were told. " You can leave it only when I am not at home or otherwise only with my permission. "
Mrs. Gruzinska was a widow and lived alone, but she had a friend with whom she socialized and played cards.

We entered the hiding place. Mrs. Gruzinska pushed the wardrobe in place and a short while later we were soundly asleep. After what seemed like just a few minutes, we were awakened by a loud impatient knock on the door of the wardrobe. Startled and frightened, we sat up not knowing what was happening, when suddenly the wardrobe was pushed aside and a tall gaunt-looking middle-aged man stood in front of us. The man looked haggard and his bloodshot blue eyes were full of tears. His blond hair was sprinkled with gray and was disheveled. " Are you Jews, are you really Jews? " he asked with a voice filled with emotion.

Not knowing what to do and a little afraid of this wild looking man, we nodded silently. " I am so glad to see you. I thought I would never see another Jew again", the man said. " my name is Novak, Dr. Novak and I too am a Jew. You can smell the smoke, can't you? " he asked anxiously ,with a grimace of pain on his face.

" The ghetto is burning, the Warsaw ghetto is going up in flames and my wife and children are trapped there. I can do nothing about it. " Silent sobs wracked his thin body. He sat down on Mrs. Gruzinska's chair and slowly quieted down. He wanted to know our story and what had happened to our family. The expression on his face became thoughtful and hopelessly sad. We sat for a while talking and then Dr. Novak stood up and left. It turned out that he stayed across the hall with the family of his childhood friend. The people who sheltered him were Mrs. Gruzinska's friends. This family had two sons who belonged to the underground army and were very idealistic and patriotic. We didn't think too long about Dr. Novak and his tragedy. We had our own worries and unhappy thoughts of how we would survive

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and find another less-expensive hiding place. At night we saw the Warsaw ghetto burning. Our window was facing the street. We wept for the people dying there. A few days passed and Dr. Novak didn't visit us.

Mrs. Gruzinska, together with the thin soup and bread, would feed us every day with tales of horror from the ghetto. How many were killed trying to escape the flames and how many were caught by the Germans and Polish police in the underground canals.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising was almost over, with only a handful of Jews still fighting.

One day, early in the morning Dr. Novak came to call. He was dressed in a freshly pressed dark suit and wore a clean shirt and tie. His hair was combed and his shoes shined. He looked very impressive and presentable. He greeted us warmly and wanted to know how we were. When we asked in astonishment where he was going, he answered " Oh ladies, didn't I tell you I am going to my office? I'm an Ophthalmologist and run a clinic in the city where a lot of patients are waiting for me. I just dropped in to say hello and see how you were doing. "

Before we managed to say something, the man was gone. Mother and I looked at one another in astonishment. " Poor Dr. Novak, the tragedy he has gone through is too much for him and surely he has lost his mind ", Mother said.

We had soon forgotten Dr. Novak. Mother and I started our daily routine of discussing the slowly diminishing money we still had and worrying about how soon Mrs. Gruzinska would find us another less expensive hiding place.

Our discussion that day was interrupted by loud screams and shouts in German. Mrs. Gruzinska was out doing her daily marketing and we were alone in the apartment. Terrified, we ran in panic to the window in our alcove, one that faced the courtyard.

Black uniformed SS men had found a group of Jews hiding in the basement of the neighboring house and were shouting to them to assemble in the courtyard.

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A little girl with blond hair and a short blue dress ran in the opposite direction, not understanding what was going on. An SS man pulled out a gun and shot her. The girl's tiny body fell to the ground. Her mother rushed screaming to her and picked up the child, cradling her in her arms. Slowly, the blouse she was wearing turned crimson from the baby's blood.

"My baby, my baby is dead " the mother screamed. With a wild, almost inhuman shriek, she tore her blouse open and ran to the SS men " please kill me too, " she begged, " I don't want to live anymore ". But, the murderer who had just killed her child just laughed and pushed her towards the group of Jews gathered in the courtyard. Later another little boy was shot at random and one elderly man.

The SS men led the group away and all that was left was blood splattered on the stones. Mother and I watched with horror, thinking who knows what tomorrow will bring for us? We may be next.

That night we couldn't sleep, thinking about our hopeless future. It was almost daylight when we finally fell asleep. After what seemed like only a very short time, we were awakened by screams and the sound of feet running in the hall. Sitting on the bed in our hiding place, we were wondering in terror of what was going on. Did the SS find Dr. Novak's hiding place and are they going to get us next? After what seemed like an eternity, a pale and distraught Mrs. Gruzinska moved the wardrobe and let us out.

" Dr. Novak just killed himself", she said. "He found a gun belonging to one of the Kozol boys and shot himself in the head. Dear God, what a mess. I will have to find you another hiding place as soon as possible."

A short time later, Irma, in whose home Dr. Novak was hiding, came in and asked to see us. She held in her hand a letter which she gave to Mother . " This is ", she said, " a letter from Dr. Robert Novak. He left it in his room and it had your name on it ".

Her eyes were swollen and red and her hands were trembling when she gave Mother the letter. " Please read it ", she whispered. Mother opened the letter and read it aloud.

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" I cannot live anymore " it said. " I am all alone. I'm taking my life to join my dear wife and children. Should you or your daughter survive the war, please grant me one enormous favor and bring my body to Palestine. This is my only wish on this earth and if you believe in God you will do it for me. May the good Lord grant you survival and peace."

What could we say? We were sorry for Dr. Novak but our future was so uncertain that we thought the fulfillment of his wish to be absurd. We told Irma that if we should survive the war, we would see to it that Dr. Novak's body was exhumed and taken to Palestine.

Irma was crying, tears streaming down her ruddy cheeks. "Ladies " she said " let me tell you a little bit about Dr. Robert Novak and what kind of person he was. You see we were childhood friends. We grew up in the same neighborhood and lived in the same apartment house. Roberts father was a poor tailor and my own father a shoemaker. We used to play together and I loved Robert like my own brother. Robert was born when his parents were already middle-aged, with married children and grandchildren. This unexpected child was much loved and doted upon.

There was no money to send him to high school and at a young age Robert started to work as an apprentice in his father's small shop. At night Robert would study and read. He borrowed books and notes from his luckier friends whose parents could afford to send them to high-school.

After several years of intensive studies, at the age of 17, Robert put on his best, and only, suit and went to the Magistrate of Education to apply for permission to take his "Matura" examination. " Matura " exams were finals that determined the ability of the student to continue studies at universities. Thanks to his non-Jewish name and blond hair, Robert was granted permission and passed all exams with flying colors.

His father the tailor was very proud and happy. He urged Robert to enroll in the University. There was no money to pay for his tuition, except a few "Zlotys" the tailor had managed to save. The young boy worked very hard to support

himself and pay for his tuition. He tutored other students and did some odd jobs.

A few months before graduating from Medical School, Robert's father, after suffering a fatal heart attack, died. His mother alone sat at his graduation, an old Jewish woman dressed in a plain cotton frock, her gnarled hands folded in her lap. Tears of pride and joy were slowly sliding down her wrinkled face.

It was then, looking at his mother, that Robert promised himself to help the poor and establish a clinic where he would see and help them without any compensation.

Irma was sobbing " we loved him. He was a saint. He helped everybody who was in need. "

Robert was an ophthalmologist and a great doctor. His fame spread quickly through Poland and his private practice prospered greatly but he never neglected his poor and spent a few hours every day at the clinic.

Mrs. Gruzinska listened attentively and was moved to tears. She rose from the table and brought a pot of tea and some glasses from the kitchen.

" Please have some tea everybody and you, Irma dear, try to calm yourself " she said. With trembling hands and tears in my eyes I poured tea for everybody.

It was getting late. The sun was setting, sending her last golden rays through Mrs. Gruzinska's heavy dusty curtains.

Robert Novak's body was still lying on the floor of his room, covered with a sheet. Irma, her face puffy and red from crying and hot tea, resumed her story.

" Yes, Robert was a saint. He has never forgotten us and sent us baskets of delicacies for Christmas and Easter. Sometimes, time permitting, he would visit. He attended the christening of our children and their graduations. "

The high society people who invited him to their parties never knew that Robert was a Jew, even if he never tried to make a secret of his religion and was a devoted Zionist. He married late and the couple had three young lovely

children. He loved his pretty wife madly. When the war broke out and Poland succumbed to the German onslaught, Robert's few gentile friends who knew that he was a Jew urged him to stay with them, naturally including his family.

Soon after the German occupation the Jews were herded into the ghetto. Robert and his family decided not to seek shelter with his Gentile friends but share in the fate of his brothers in the ghetto.

In the ghetto he promptly opened a clinic for the poor, next to the tiny room he shared with his family. He treated everybody who needed help. I used to send some food but it was very difficult smuggling it into the ghetto.

Robert's wife and children grew thinner and weaker from hunger and malnutrition, 'til the youngest little girl, five years old, contracted pneumonia and died. Their grief at losing a child was tremendous, but still Robert went about his business and attended the sick in his clinic.

One day in the late afternoon in February, two German SS men knocked on Robert's door. Terrified for his family if not for himself, he opened the door. One of the SS men announced that Robert was summoned to the Gestapo headquarters of the city.

After a tearful goodbye to his wife and children, Robert left with the SS man.

After arriving at the Gestapo headquarters he was ushered into a large beautifully furnished room and told to wait for the Chief of the Gestapo. He was told by the Chief, who arrived after a short while, that they had heard of Dr. Novak who was a famous ophthalmologist and he was very happy to make his acquaintance. After shaking Robert's hand, he told him to sit down. " We have a great problem " he said. " There is a man of a very high rank in the SS who has a terrible problem with his eyes. Would you please look and examine him? He is in terrible pain and waiting to see you. "

Robert agreed. He had no choice and maybe, he thought, if he would cure the man's illness he would be able to save

his family. He went home, packed his instruments and said goodbye again to his wife and children.

The same two Gestapo men were waiting for him and took him to a high school which had been converted into a military hospital.

Obersturmfuhrer Helmut Von Kluge was lying in a darkened room with a young German nurse who was applying compresses to his eyes. The man was moaning in pain. When Robert walked in he motioned the nurse to leave. Von Kluge said, with a voice filled with emotion, to Robert " Please doctor, save my eyes. Save my sight. The pain is unbearable. I wish myself dead. My poor wife and children. I will never see them again. "

Robert cringed. Here was the enemy, the murderer of innocents lying helpless, delivered to his hands, his Jewish hands.

It would be the right thing to let him go blind or maybe die but I am a doctor, a healer and no matter who the sick man is, it is my moral duty to save him. He remembered the oath of Aesclepius and the words of his dear wife who said to him when they parted that maybe by healing the SS man he would be able to save the rest of the Jews in the ghetto and his beloved family.

"All right, I will help you and will do my best " Robert said. Before examining Von Kluge Robert was fed, bathed, and given clean clothing. His diagnosis of the captain's illness was swift and accurate Von Kluge had a huge tumor in the back of his left eye, which was pressing on his optic nerve and extending into his brain. The operation, which took place few days later, was a fantastic success. Robert was able to excise the tumor without damaging nerves and muscles. The German was going to see and live. The tumor was benign.

Robert remained at the German's side a few weeks. Von Kluge recovered completely. When the time came for Robert to leave Von Kluge called him into his room and offered him money and foodstuffs.

" I am grateful to you and I know that I owe you my sight and my life but there's nothing I can do to save your family and the Jews in the ghetto. "

While I was convalescing, a group of Jewish hooligans started an uprising in the ghetto. It was out of my hands to do anything. There was no choice. We had to step in and stamp out the revolt. The ghetto is burning now and no one can escape. All I can do for you is to keep you here where you will be safe until they send me to the Russian front.

Robert stood speechless. He refused the generous offer of money or asylum. Suddenly his whole world crumbled and collapsed. It seemed like yesterday that he bid his family goodbye and now he was not to see them again.

He stood silent for a moment and then, like an automaton, walked out of the German's office and hospital building into the street. He wandered aimlessly for hours, tears streaming down his cheeks. He saw from afar the ghetto burning, the smoke rising to heaven and Robert wandered until it became dark. Shortly before the 9:00 curfew my son Ted was rushing home from a secret underground meeting and saw a man standing in the middle of the street crying. The streets were almost deserted. When Ted looked closer at the man he recognized Dr. Novak whom he knew all his life. He took his arm and brought him home. He lived with us just two weeks but his heart and spirit were broken. He seemed lucid most of the time but occasionally his mind wandered. He imagined that he was still practicing and that he was going home to his wife and children.

"This is the story of Dr. Robert Novak, a good person, a great human being, and a devoted Jew" , Irma said. Dr. Rob Robert Novak was buried in a gentile cemetery. His grave was marked with a wooden stick bearing his name.

Almost two years after, the war was over. Mother and I survived. We remembered Roberts' letter. Warsaw was burned out and in ruins. When we came from the little town where we survived, hiding in Mrs. Gruzinska's friend's home, we couldn't find the Kozols or Mrs. Gruzinska. The apartment house had been bombed and the inhabitants evacuated.

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I often think of Dr. Novak and hope that his gentle soul found peace that was so cruelly denied to him toward the end of his life. His body remains buried in the hostile Polish soil, but I hope that his spirit found his way and lives on in his beloved Israel.

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